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Easter

A love letter survives from the time of the Renaissance written by an anonymous man to his beloved. Apparently, judging from the content of this letter, the woman was constantly plagued by doubt in regards to the man's love for her. While he understood this with great patience, at times he grew weary of having to constantly reassure her of his love. In an effort to explain to her how steadfast his love was, he wrote this sentence to her, "You need to have belief in me and yourself to know that even when it's not there, it IS there." By this, he meant even in those times when his words were absent, his love was still present. In other words, his beloved needed to learn to have faith, even in the absence of words. Because, even in the absence of reassuring words, my love remains, the man promised her.

But it's so very hard to trust something when it seems to be gone, isn't it?

It's hard to rejoice over an emptiness. It's a difficult thing to get all excited over a absence of something, over something that's missing. How do you look down into an empty abyss and find hope? Well, that's exactly what we're faced with today.

Today we do not celebrate what we find. Instead, we celebrate what we do NOT find.

Today we celebrate what is *not* there...or more accurately, *who is not there*.

Indeed, there are plenty of people who *are* present in this morning's Gospel.

We have two Mary's and one Joanna, plus the other women who come to the tomb with them to anoint Jesus' body. We have a dozen disciples, minus one, and two men in dazzling white. So there are at least twenty people

present and accounted for in this Easter story. *Twenty people*, all running around, this way and that, trying to figure out what's going on. So much commotion, so much confusion, that it might be easy to overlook one rather important detail. Of all the people present, the most important person is absent...

...and that, of course, is *Jesus*. Where in the world is Jesus?

He is the reason there is so much commotion and confusion. He is the one they are searching for. But he is nowhere to be found, not even by these twenty people who know him best. These twenty people are not just your typical bunch off the streets—these are people who *should* know what's going on. They are ones who have been with Jesus since the very beginning.

Here is Jesus' own mother, here are his best friends, here are the women

who watched—unblinking—as he was crucified. These are ones who have seen his miracles and have heard him preach; these are ones who have been told over and over that he would be arrested, crucified and that he would die and rise from the dead on the third day. If anyone should know what is going on, it should be them!

And yet even they don't get it—the pandemonium of people running this way and that, crossing paths running to and from the tomb, colliding with each other in their confused coming and going. They are baffled, because they can't find the one they're looking for. They are mystified, because the body they came to anoint is nowhere to be found. They are confused because all they see is an empty tomb. They came looking for something; instead, they find nothing.

And what are you supposed to do when you come expecting to find a body, but instead find an empty tomb? Celebrate? Laugh? Cry? Call the police?

What do you do when you expect to find something, but instead find only *nothing*? This is a complete reversal of natural law...Up until this point, once a body is laid in a tomb, it stays there. After all, if the dead don't stay dead, what can you count on? When an occupied tomb is suddenly vacant, what *do* you do?

The natural human instinct is to despair, like the lady lover in my initial illustration. In the absence of her lovers' reassuring words, she despairs. She finds no hope in the emptiness. In the absence of Jesus' body, the disciples are full of doubt. That's the usual reaction...but not always. Every once in a while, we catch a glimpse of what it means to see hope in the face of nothing.

I offer an example. My boys are growing. They are eating me out of house and home. I can already wear Christian's shoes, and if he were a girl, we could share jeans. The boys' bones ache at night. They come home from school and open the refrigerator even before taking their coats off. Most of the time, our fridge is full, as most of you know. Sometimes, though, if I haven't had time to stock up, they come home, throw open the fridge and immediately fall into deep despair.

"There's nothing in here!" they protest, as if they were even remotely underfed. This is the typical refrain when they encounter an understocked fridge. Until one day, one of the boys, upon opening a rather bare fridge, said this, "Hey, don't worry! This means Mom's going to the grocery store and soon it will be full of food!"

Ah ha! So there *can* be hope when confronted by an empty void! A *nothing* can contain the promise of *something*. If the child can peer into an empty fridge and say, “Hang on, boys, soon it will be full!” then a disciple can peer into an empty tomb and say, “Hang on, folks, I see some hope here!”...which is exactly what stirs in Peter to get up and go have a look for himself even when the others did not...he had that gorgeous, curious faith that says, “Hmm, I think there’s something in this nothingness!” Peter peers into the nothingness and sees something—he sees a promise fulfilled by Jesus. Jesus has kept his resurrection promise, which is why he is not in his tomb.

The resurrection of Jesus IS a complete reversal of the natural order of things. Now, the dead don’t stay dead. Now, there is a future without

weeping or cries of distress. Now, we yearn for the future instead of fearing it, because in God's future, we will not hurt like we do now. Now, we know there is a God of mercy who promises not to remember our former selves, the former things we've said and done. Now, instead of pinning all our hopes and dreams on something, we pin them on nothing...the nothingness inside of Jesus' tomb.

Today, this day, this Easter, we do not celebrate what *is* there, but instead we celebrate what is NOT there...Jesus is *not* there, just like he told us he wouldn't be! We are called on to have faith in the nothingness contained in the tomb. Faith is not what we see and know...no, faith is "is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things *not* seen." (Hebrews 11.1)

This morning, Jesus is *not* seen in the tomb, and that's exactly the point!

Faith is looking into an empty fridge and seeing future abundance. Faith is looking into an empty tomb and seeing life where there once was death.

Faith is knowing for absolute certain there is love, even when the words are not spoken at that very instant.

Even if the words aren't always there, the love is still there.

Even when the body isn't there, the resurrection miracle is there.

Jesus' tomb *must* be empty if there is to be room for all of our hope.

If Jesus' tomb is empty—and if every single tomb in the universe is now empty—then that means heaven is full!

Kind of like an Easter basket that must be empty first, if all of our eggs are to fit inside. If it's already full, there is not room for anything else. The tomb

is empty, the basket is empty, and there is now plenty of room for our
hatching eggs of hope, the reassurance that God's new future is now
breaking upon us.

All of this, all because of an empty tomb and a man who didn't even show
up to his biggest gig in history...all of this joy and hope and love, coming to
us from an empty tomb...and in a great reversal of things, we celebrate that
fabulous nothingness in that empty tomb...

The nothingness in the empty tomb is the cosmic declaration that death no
longer has the final word. Instead, the final word is life. We peer into the
empty tomb and see nothing. And at first, we are gripped by panic because
an empty void is a scary thing. But then God's word whispers to us and
reassures us that that emptiness is pregnant with new life.

The *nothing* we encounter today is really quite *something*, don't you think?

Because that *nothingness* of the empty tomb is vast enough to contain

absolutely *everything*...and *everybody*.